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AUTHOR	Cheek, Freddie
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ABSTRACT

Career counselors and job search coaches must be prepared to assist disabled clients as this sector of the labor market increases. As the work force ages, there are greater numbers of workers dealing with disabilities and serious health problems. Sadly, individuals with disabilities often approach the job search process with misconceptions, misinformation, limited expectations, and fear of failure. Counselors must give these applicants the skills and confidence they need to be marketable candidates that employers will want to hire. This paper provides insight into the problem and offers techniques for helping clients increase their self-confidence, improve their job search skills, and prepare for job interviews. The author addresses the emotional barriers that many disabled job seekers place in their own path and gives practical advice on how to remove these road blocks. This information can be used with the most-needy clients to help them attain appropriate and satisfying employment. (Author)

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Coaching The Job Seeker With Special Needs

Freddie Cheek, M.S. Ed., CCM, CPRW, CRW, CWDP
Cheek & Cristantello Career Connections
Amherst, New York USA

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As career counsellors and job search trainers, we are given the challenge of helping adults find suitable, satisfying, and rewarding careers and employment. Expanding your practice to include persons with disabilities is especially important as the workforce ages. In addition to counselling people with disabilities who are looking to enter the job market, we are also seeing more individuals who no longer can work in their chosen fields.

A significant part of my practice is comprised of people who are seeking new direction once injuries and illnesses prevent them from returning to their prior careers. When they come to see me they are hesitant, frightened, and filled with horror stories about people "someone knows" who couldn't find work, re-injured themselves, or, worse yet, found themselves in boring, low-paying, or unfulfilling jobs.

Our task then is to prepare them mentally, emotionally, and spiritually to be competitive members of the workforce – whether they are seeking their very first job or are seasoned workers hoping to regain their place in the labor market. This is a daunting challenge since we have to overcome their self-imposed obstacles in addition to the barriers that society places upon them.

This paper describes the barriers that our clients place in their own paths and the ways that we, their counsellors, can help them find the jobs they want and deserve. Specifically, it addresses problems with self-esteem, self-absorption, job uncertainty, disclosure issues, the need for flexibility, unreasonable expectations, and how they can master the job interview and sell themselves to prospective employers.

These clients do not want to be treated any differently than other job seekers. They have told me time and again, please tell us the truth and do not hold back; we need to know what we are doing wrong. Therefore, I take a very matter-of-fact and tell-it-like-it-is approach to my counselling and coaching work.

My clients express their appreciation and relief that I am being candid with them. We need to be comfortable pointing out that they need to wipe their mouths or lower the volume of their voices or even to use deodorant. If we see the problems then employers surely will too. This is not insensitivity – we can be quite compassionate in helping our clients while still being honest and direct.

With this approach I have been very successful helping place into well-paying, competitive jobs, persons with the most severe disabilities, including quadriplegics and people with terribly debilitating illnesses and injuries. I will say and do whatever I have to, in a constructive and helpful way, to help my clients find appropriate and meaningful work.

I once attended a national conference for professionals who work with immigrants. A placement counsellor spoke of working with an elderly Chinese gentleman who had a white beard and pure white hair. He advised the job seeker to dye his hair black and cut the beard. I was shocked and complained to the speaker that he had robbed his client of his personal identity and self-esteem. He put me in my place by pointing out that being unemployed was more damaging to the man's self-esteem than a change of hair color. He was right – being out of work is devastating to most adults. Not working and perceiving yourself as being useless or a burden to others is a self-esteem killer. Once the client has a new job and knows the workplace culture there will be time to grow the beard, wear the wild clothes, and put back the nose ring.

Self-Esteem

I am always stunned by how inferior many of my clients feel in comparison to other workers. They somehow get the idea that everyone else is more desirable to employers. They feel that they will be overlooked in favor of more experienced or better qualified candidates. These inferiority feelings are often based on false information. I created the "Raise Your Hand" exercise that can be done with groups and individuals who feel they are not good enough. I've used it with ex-offenders, persons with disabilities, people with limited education and experience – you name it. Once you try this you will see how easy yet empowering it is.

I ask my clients the following questions and require them to actually raise their hands (if they physically can) if their answer is Yes. The movement of repeatedly raising their hands helps drive home the point we are making – that they are very desirable and competitive. I ask my clients if they have ever worked for anyone else, in a paid or volunteer capacity. If clients have never worked, I ask them to base their responses on people they have observed in stores and restaurants.

Raise your hand if you have ever worked with (or noticed) someone who:

1. Doesn't seem to care about the quality of work they do.
2. Complains all the time or has a negative attitude.
3. Puts in the minimum effort required to do the least amount of work.
4. Has poor attendance – being tardy or absent a lot.
5. Spreads gossip or frequently talks about personal matters.
6. Won't put in a minute of extra work or won't offer to take on more responsibility.
7. Takes an "it's not my job" attitude and refuses to help others.
8. Basically doesn't earn their pay and makes you wonder how they ever got their job and how they manage to keep it.

As you can imagine, I usually see hands going up for most of these questions. Then I turn the questions around.

Raise your hand if YOU:

1. Care about the quality of work you do.
2. Prefer to take a positive, can-do approach.
3. Want to put in whatever effort it takes to get the job done right.
4. Do what you have to do to get to work on time every day.
5. Feel a responsibility to concentrate on work rather than personal matters.
6. Are willing to take on extra work and more responsibility.
7. Know that if everyone pitches in and helps each other then the whole company benefits.
8. Have always more than earned your pay and deserved to keep your job and maybe even advance.

I point out that a percentage of the workforce has the bad work traits mentioned in the first half of the exercise. And many of these workers are their competition in the job market. We all know that it isn't always the most qualified or experienced applicant who gets hired.

Many employers are willing to teach the hard skills (how to operate the machines, etc.). Their problem is that they know they can't teach the soft skills (initiative, punctuality, efficiency, etc.). How do you train someone to care, to be conscientious, to be pleasant, or to have a positive attitude? Employers know they are much better off if they hire people with a good work ethic.

If our clients raised their hands for most of the second set of questions, they will be desirable job candidates. Our task is to teach them how to let prospective employers know that they have that superior work ethic. And, to remind our clients that, regardless of their skill level or abilities, they are still more qualified than the workers who exhibit those poor work traits.

Self-Absorption

This is a very common and perilous problem. When people spend months and years dwelling on their disability and its affect on their lives, that disability sometimes becomes their primary focus. Instead of being outward-directed, clients become self-centered. While this may be a necessity to survive and thrive, it has to change when they enter the workforce. We realize that employers can't get involved in our problems. They, of necessity, have to spend most of their time and energy caring about the company. And this is good. No matter how great a job we do, if the company fails we are still unemployed.

I once had a client complain, "All that employers care about is making money and being successful." Let's hope so!! Even non-profits have to meet their goals and show success. There are no raises, no new equipment, no added benefits, and no future with a company that is failing.

I coach my clients to think and talk in terms of what they can do for their employer. What value can they add, how will they benefit the bottom line? This is the foundation of most sales campaigns – identifying features and benefits. I give them the Features and Benefits exercise (Table 1) to identify not only their core duties and responsibilities, but also their accomplishments. The key is to stop thinking in terms of just what they did but also to describe their effectiveness.

Table 1

Name_____

EMPLOYMENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Features and Benefits:

For each main duty and responsibility, consider the result and benefit to the employer -

Duty/Responsibility	Value/Benefit/Outcome

Accomplishments:

When reviewing your accomplishments, consider:

Scope of job, territory, and responsibility; ways that you saved money, increased profits, reduced waste, increased productivity, enhanced efficiency, increased sales, and expanded client base; ways that you improved product quality or enhanced customer services; even suggestions you made. Remember to include numbers, dollar amounts, percentages, statistics, etc. Demonstrate that you are able to perform at the highest level of excellence; that you are customer-centered and profit-driven. Tell what you did to make your boss look good.

Accomplishments:

When an interviewer asks my clients what they want out of a job, my job seekers know to answer in terms of what an employer wants in a worker. And, they back it up with concrete examples. I encourage them to use the CAR method (challenge – action – result) and give an example of a specific problem, how they addressed it, and the successful outcome.

Job Uncertainties - What If?

My clients often ask, "What if they ask me to do something I am not allowed to do or cannot do well?" They figure, "I'd better tell them in advance what I can't do and what will be a problem." This attitude is a sure way to end an interview. I'll share two examples:

Following a factory workplace injury, Laura had endured back surgery and months of rehabilitation. After receiving computer training she sought a job as an office clerk, a position that would not require any heavy lifting. During her first job interview she was asked if there was anything she could not do. She responded that she could not do any lifting as a result of her disability and back surgery. Did she get the job? Of course not!

I advised her to answer only as it relates to the job. They were asking her if there was any part of the job she couldn't do. The answer to that question was, "No – there is no part of the job I can't do." After all, there are hundreds of things each of us can't do (think Olympic sports, most foreign languages, lion taming – you get the idea). She laughed when I told her that and she argued that no one was going to ask her to tame wild animals. I pointed out that no one was likely to ask her to move furniture either. And if she is ever asked to do physical work outside her job description she should politely decline and say that she didn't want to injure herself and end up like people she knows with back problems.

Paul had injured his knee and, after surgery and a year out of work, was finally ready to seek employment. He is an insurance agent and basically works at a desk all day. His chosen field is still appropriate for someone with his restrictions (no extensive walking or climbing and no heavy lifting). His first job interview went very well and the employer asked about his availability. He said he could start right away but they deserved to know that he might possibly need knee surgery in the next three months. Their interest in his candidacy immediately ended. Even though he was coached to answer questions only as they related to the job, he felt he was being fair and honest by warning them about potential health problems. What he failed to consider is that no one can predict the future. Life happens and nothing is a certainty. A worker's obligation is to go to work each day and do the best work possible. Of course, if surgery was already scheduled, Paul should have delayed his job search or taken a temporary position. As it turned out, almost two years later he still hasn't needed a knee operation. Going to work and being moderately active was like daily physical therapy and the knee strengthened without surgery.

Disclosure

Disclosure is a very tough problem to address because you will be fighting well-ingrained behaviors. The disclosure issue falls into two opposite categories: disclose or don't disclose.

The first side of the coin is particularly true with recovering addicts. Recovery programs teach our clients to confront their demons, step up to the mike, and admit their problems. That works well in a 12-step program but not in a job interview. My clients are justifiably proud of their accomplishments. This is often their greatest and most important success. They also think that employers will be impressed with their strength of will, their ability to overcome a long-time addiction, and their commitment to being clean and sober. That's not how many employers see it. If someone has been dry for 15 years – that person is way overdue for a relapse. People know from experience that we fall off diets, start smoking again, etc. They know the police often look at ex-felons with similar MOs because humans tend to revert back to old bad habits, especially when under stress (like a new job). I can't stress enough to my clients – if employers cannot see the disability – AND if there is no need for accommodation – DON'T TELL!!!

On the other side of this are the clients who stand firmly behind legislation that protects the rights of the disabled. Most of my clients have visible disabilities yet they tell me they never mention those disabilities in an interview. Whether or not the client says anything – there is an elephant in the room that everyone sees. The problem is that the employer cannot comment on that elephant. We all see the wheelchair, the guide dog, the crutches, or the cane. We just can't ask about it. If the client doesn't bring it up, it is never discussed DURING the interview. However,

as soon as the candidate leaves, that's all the interviewers will talk about. The whole time the interview was taking place, the employer was thinking about that wheelchair – not the applicant's skills.

I tell my clients to quickly bring it up, invite questions, and get past it. A typical example is Linda who walked with a cane due to a degenerative hip disease. She worked at a desk job and really only needed the cane for getting to and from work. She also wore sneakers (with her business suit) to improve her traction. Although she had superior qualifications, she never received job offers. I asked her to change her interview style and to bring up the cane and sneakers at the beginning of the meeting. She agreed and at the next interview she off-handedly mentioned that she hoped it was okay to wear sneakers since she had a problem with her hip. She assured them that this would in no way affect her job performance and the cane was basically to help her balance. She then invited their questions. The employer listened to her comments, shrugged, and began interviewing her about her training and experience. The cane and sneakers were never mentioned again. Linda has been happily employed at that company for over two years. All that the interviewer needed to know was that she could do the job and do it well and that the disability would not pose a problem.

Need for Flexibility

Many of our clients see the world in terms of all or nothing. Because there are so many absolutes in their lives, i.e., what they can and can't do – they approach the work world with "I have to have this or I can't do that." It's as if they have already given up so much, they are afraid to settle for less than the perfect situation. Life, however, is filled with compromises.

We have to strongly encourage the acceptance of a career-ladder approach to clients' jobs. Start off with something that is close to what they want. Our job is to help them see all of their options. The truth is that hardly anyone initially gets their dream job and usually has to modify that job over time

Now, I'm not telling my clients to settle for any old job. I warn them to never take a job they will hate – too many people already do that. But be willing to take small steps at first. Use this job to build up their confidence, references, work experience, skills, etc. They may be able to grow that job or use it as a springboard to the next position. They can show their next boss their successful track record and not just their potential. The next job is always easier to get than the first job.

Unrealistic Expectations

The last problem area I want to discuss concerns unreasonable expectations. Our clients have to live in the real world of work. The down side of being treated just like everyone else is that our clients have to accept the realities of the workplace.

For example, Carol took some office classes before dropping out of high school and worked for six months as a receptionist before sustaining a foot injury. After raising her daughter she decided to seek employment. She wanted a job with: no computer or phone work, no one telling her what to do, no customer contact, no boring work, no repetitive tasks, $10+ an hour, and less than a five-minute commute. Her expectations were unreasonable, especially for her limited training and minimal experience, and her ideal job may not even exist.

I give my clients a handout of Job Truths (Table 2). If they are aware of the realities of the job search process and the culture of the workplace, they are better prepared for success and more likely to find job satisfaction.

Table 2

10 Job Search Truths

1. Everyone has problems but most overcome them with creativity, resourcefulness, and effort.
2. Some things are just beyond our control.
3. Life is a journey and not a terminal activity (when I get…then I can…). Take each step as an opportunity to grow and not as an ending.
4. You must live in the real world and be reasonable when setting goals and having expectations.
5. You cannot rewrite your past (if only…) - you must accept where you are now and go forward.
6. Expect change and embrace it (every tomorrow offers the possibility of being better than today).
7. No one can or will commit as much time to your job search as you can and should.
8. The best opportunities are the ones you create.
9. There is no magic bullet – just hard work.
10. *** Perception is Reality *** If you come across as a qualified and viable candidate for the job – you will be treated as such.

Our disabled clients deserve the best we can offer in coaching, training, support, and advice. While treating them like any other job seeker, we must also counsel them on the most appropriate attitudes as we teach them the most successful actions and responses to ensure their ability to obtain and keep the jobs they want and deserve.

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